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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000787

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/01/2017

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SUBJECT: DAMASCUS HOSTS WHO CONFERENCE ON IRAQI REFUGEES

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, for reasons 1.4 b/d.

11. (C) Summary. The World Health Organization (WHO) organized a regional conference on the health concerns of Iraqi refugees in Damascus on July 29 and 30. Arab diplomats and Syrians who work for international organizations complimented the SARG's willingness to step in at the last moment to host the conference and have been generally upbeat in describing the conference as a step in the right direction. An Egyptian diplomat said the Iraqis and Syrians "managed to get along," but noted the SARG delivered an unhelpful message. End Summary.

12. (C) On July 29 to 30 the World Health Organization (WHO) in coordination with the Syrian government held a conference in Damascus to address the health issues faced by Iraqi refugees in the region. In attendance were the Health Ministers of Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and Syria. Also in attendance were Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mikdad and Iraqi Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Hamoud as well as representatives from a number of U.N. agencies including the UNHCR, UNDP, OCHA, UNICEF, and the WFP, according to Iraqi Emboff Mayada al-Yaseen,

13. (C) Egyptian Ambassador Hazem Khairat told the Charge the Syrians stepped in "at the last minute" to host the meeting when Jordan declined because of the Amman Refugee Working Group meeting. According to one attendee, representatives of all attending countries agreed to provide primary and emergency care to Iraqi refugees. (Note. Syria is already doing so but Post is unaware of the policies of other host nations. End Note.) Based on her read of what was said at the conference, Yaseen commented that the Syrians may be somewhat more receptive to having international aid run through relief agencies like the Syrian Arab Red Crescent than the Jordanians who, she commented, still insist that all foreign aid must go through their treasury first. The Egyptian DCM, who is not necessarily an unbiased source, who attended the conference said the Syrians and Iraqis had "managed to get along" although the lack of trust between the two sides had been clear. The Egyptian Diplomat noted that Mikdad had stood up and delivered a rousing condemnation of the "U.S. occupation as the cause of all health problems," which was viewed as out of step with the rest of the conference.

14. (U) A consultant to the WHO in Syria, Dr. Nazar el-Faki, described the conference as successful in achieving general agreement on six broad areas of action:

- ensuring open and equal access of refugees to host states, health systems
- establishing adequate "surveillance systems" for

- refugee health needs
- focusing greater efforts on primary and preventative health care
- improving coordination among states and agencies
- mobilizing resources
- developing and refining systems for gathering information on refugee health requirements

(Note. Host states do not currently distinguish between service provision to nationals versus refugees, Faki explained, and the WHO is urging states to segregate their data. End note.)

15. (U) Faki noted that there was a broad discussion about ways to deliver funds to states that are hosting refugees and the most appropriate international agency to coordinate the channeling of assistance. Faki remarked the SARG had yet to urgently and openly express its need for assistance in congruence to the burdens on the Syrian health care system. As others are doing in Syria, Faki wondered aloud how long the SARG will keep its borders open to Iraqi refugees.

CORBIN